

By Keith Goldberg

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Josh Van Strander sat on the floor of his bedroom, holding his loaded handgun. It was 2:30 a.m., the end of a long, alcohol-fueled night.

Nearly two years had passed since his return from a yearlong tour as an Army combat line medic in Afghanistan.

Two years spent grappling with the guilt of coming home alive while friends and comrades didn't. Two years of folks expecting him to be the same forgiving, compassionate kid he was before going off to war. That person was gone forever.

He was 22 years old. He felt completely alone.

Only Van Strander wasn't alone that December 2008 morning. One of his best friends, who'd served beside him in Afghanistan, had stopped by his Greenville house to spend the night. He saw Van Strander on the floor, with the gun. He convinced him to put it down.

The next day, Van Strander went to a Department of Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic in Port Jervis and told a social worker he needed help. Then, he got rid of all his guns.

"I was nearly one of those statistics," Van Strander said.

Statistics such as: Suicides among male veterans aged 17 to 29 jumped 26 percent from 2005 to 2007, according to the VA. And more U.S. military personnel committed suicide in 2009 than were killed in Afghanistan or Iraq, according to Congressional Quarterly.

Van Strander wants to change those numbers. He began with himself, entering treatment at the VA's hospital in Castle Point and fighting for his medical benefits. Last month, the VA finally diagnosed him with a traumatic brain injury — caused by close encounters with mortar rounds and IEDs — and post-traumatic stress disorder.

College was next: first SUNY Orange, where Van Strander worked with the VA to send caseworkers from Castle Point to assist fellow student veterans, then Empire State College, where he's finishing a psychology degree.

Now, Van Strander is working in Rep. John Hall's district office in Goshen.

He started a two-year fellowship this month as part of the House of Representatives' Wounded Warrior Program, which provides job opportunities in congressional offices to disabled post-9/11 veterans. Van Strander is the first program member in New York and one of only a handful nationwide.

His job: assisting veterans' caseworkers and doing outreach.

"I just want veterans to see that they have help, that they have a shot at life," Van Strander says.

"Not just surviving ... living."

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HELP FOR VETERANS

If you're a combat veteran looking for medical help, contact the Returning Combat Veteran Program at the VA's Hudson Valley Healthcare System at either of two locations:

Castle Point campus:

831-2000, ext. 5016

Montrose campus:

914-737-4400, ext. 2758

<http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100125/NEWS/1250318/-1/SITEMAP>